

gas prices. Consumers are currently paying an average of \$2.91 per gallon for gasoline. Last summer it was \$2.25. Why the almost 70-cent increase? This summer, as the real driving season begins, Americans are expected to pay even more at the pump than last summer.

But in the meantime, look at these profits. Look at ExxonMobil, one of the larger oil companies in this country. Look at their profits. You can take all of the net income of the oil companies, their profits in the last year was \$113 billion in profits.

While the majority party has put out a one-page press release talking about things they would like to do, Democrats have real solutions that could be brought to the House floor today that would have an immediate effect and lower the price of gasoline for all Americans.

For example, there are currently no Federal laws against gas price-gouging. The only way the Federal Trade Commission can attempt to prosecute unfair pricing is by using the antitrust laws or the monopoly laws of this country. To date, in the entire history of the Federal Trade Commission, not one, not one case has ever been brought before the courts to prosecute for price gouging. Because the Federal Government does not have a clear definition or standard of what price gouging is, the FTC cannot do little more than make a study of the current gas price situation. Americans are tired of studies and want real answers.

Last September I introduced a bill to increase the Federal Government's ability to prosecute price gougers. My bill, the FREE Act, the Federal Response to Energy Emergencies, will provide the Federal Trade Commission and the Department of Justice with the authority to investigate and prosecute those who engage in predatory pricing from oil companies all of the way down to distributors, with an emphasis on those who profit the most.

The FREE Act, our legislation that could be on the floor tomorrow, will also allow each State attorney general to go into Federal district court to prosecute unfair pricing practices.

When we talk about unfair price practices, we talk about everything in the chain and distribution and supply of oil and gasoline. Take a look at this here, from the time it comes out of the ground, refineries to distributors and retailers, taxes, all of the way to the consumer. We should be able to investigate every aspect of it. If you look at what the Republicans have been proposing, you only get to do an investigation when the President declares a national emergency and it is only for the distributors and retailers, not the refinery who has a 255 percent increase in the cost of refining a gallon of gasoline in a year, nor even the crude oil producers who went up 46 percent in the last year.

When we introduced our bill to increase the Federal Government's abil-

ity to prosecute price gougers, we included everybody. We want to make sure that the American people are protected from the time it comes out of the ground until you put it in your vehicle. Our legislation expands the Federal Trade Commission's authority to more aggressively pursue market manipulations such as geographic price settings or territorial restrictions put forth by the refineries.

Why has gas gone up? In the last 12 months, from September 2004 to September 2005, it has gone up 255 percent. Is that price gouging? We happen to think it is, but we need a clear definition. Right now there are 28 States with different standards as to price gouging. That is why it is so important to have a Federal standard.

Our bill also imposes tough civil penalties up to triple the damages on excess profits.

Madam Speaker, we are trying to fight high gas prices. Democrats stand ready, willing and able to do our job.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. DREIER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. DREIER addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

THE GATHERING STORM OF VENEZUELA'S HUGO CHAVEZ

Mr. MACK. Madam Speaker, I ask permission to take my Special Order at this time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Florida?

There was no objection.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MACK) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MACK. Madam Speaker, while freedom is on the march in many places around the world, a resurgence of Socialist, Communist and anti-freedom governments and movements in Latin America represent an emerging threat to freedom and the United States.

The instigator is Venezuela's Socialist President Hugo Chavez, who is using state-owned oil money to underwrite his iron-fisted control of the Venezuelan people, and to back his alliances with leftist leaders and causes throughout Latin America.

With Chavez sitting on top of 6.5 percent of the world's proven oil reserves, and buoyed by oil at roughly \$75 a barrel, Chavez has assumed the identity of a modern-day Simon Bolivar, who attempted to unify Latin America in the 1800s. Oil is Chavez's ATM to finance a "Bolivarian revolution" that abuses Presidential power in Venezuela and fans the flames of Socialists, and regional instability.

In an interview last year, Chavez was clear in his motives. "I am a revolu-

tionary. I have to support the left wing movements in Latin America. We have to change Latin America." That is exactly what he is doing at the expense of freedom, security and prosperity.

Democratic institutions are eroding rapidly in Venezuela. The legislative branch is controlled by Chavez, made up entirely of Chavez allies. The judicial branch is controlled by Chavez. The National Electoral Council is controlled by Chavez. It is no longer impartial. The Electoral Council addresses the interests of Chavez and the government, not civil society.

The council is no longer acting in conformity to the law, and many question the reliability of the electronic voting machines in Venezuela.

Chavez, a former paratrooper, sees the military as an instrument of social transformation. And now he is openly recruiting and arming civilians to join his newly created militia under the false suspicion that the United States is going to invade Venezuela.

The public prosecutor, the Office of the Comptroller, and the People's Advocate are all controlled by Chavez. President Chavez has packed the Supreme Court with his supporters, and justices are biased in his favor. Make no mistake, the independence of the judiciary has been compromised.

Human rights and fundamental freedoms are under threat. Discrimination on political grounds is growing and members of the human rights community are often charged with treason and as coup plotters. Acts of violence and prosecution of human rights defenders are growing.

Those active in the defense of democracy in Venezuela are being prosecuted and imprisoned without due process. Leaders of the political opposition group Sumate are being prosecuted for accepting a small grant from the National Endowment for Democracy under a judicial system where the nation's courts have been packed with Chavez cronies.

Freedom of expression is under siege. Chavez is snuffing out a free press and free speech with new laws that impose jail terms for journalists for gravely offending the President or the government. The media is now subject to surveillance, censorship, and intimidation.

And to ensure the unfettered ability to spread his anti-freedom messages throughout the region, Chavez last year launched his own television network, Telesur. Telesur announced a formal alliance with Al-Jazeera, bolstering Chavez's Socialist-Based propaganda with the resources and reach of pro-terrorist programming.

Chavez is taking control over private banks and confiscating large parcels of private property. And to make matters worse, Chavez is planning a new assault on the private sector in Venezuela by taking major steps towards nationalizing Venezuela's oil industry